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The Strike Groupings of a Front

by

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In a modern offensive operation by a front, despite the decisive role played by nuclear/missile weapons, the need to create strong and mobile strike groupings (udarnaya gruppirovka) remains. By the strike grouping of a front one should understand a unit of forces and weapons intended for the destruction of a particular grouping of the enemy by the use of means of destruction and by maneuver. In practice, strike groupings will be comprised of formations included in the composition of a front with their allotted forces and weapons. Since these groupings are intended for the successive performance of tasks in particular directions and to a specific depth, we consider it inadvisable to include in their composition the forces and weapons remaining at the disposal of the commander of the front. A front's forces and weapons may be used in support of the combat operations of several strike groupings and also for the performance of other tasks for the front.

Exploiting the results of nuclear/missile strikes delivered by the weapons of the front and of the General Headquarters (Stavka) of the Supreme High Command (VGH) the strike groupings of a front must be capable of destroying the enemy in short periods and of occupying his major installations and lines in depth.

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During the course of the past war and also in exercises and maneuvers in the postwar period there was and there still is a tendency to create strike groupings chiefly from the large units which combine strike force and mobility, i.e., from tank divisions. In the creation of front strike groupings at the present time, special preference is given to tank armies. It is considered that they constitute "the basis of the strike groupings of the first echelon of a front".¹

The use of tank armies as the strike groupings of a front under modern conditions will become more difficult. It is known that during a series of recent training exercises there were certain shortcomings in the use of tank armies. The Minister of Defense and the Commander-in-Chief of Ground Troops noted substantial shortcomings in the use of tank armies by both sides at the exercise conducted by the Commander-in-Chief of Ground Troops in 1959. One of the reasons for these shortcomings is the change in the conditions of conducting combat operations brought about by the appearance of new means of combat.

Considerable influence is exerted on the use of tank armies by the state of modern means of intelligence and destruction and also by the enemy's ability to counter the maneuver of a tank army by maneuvering of his own motorized large units. The enemy will concentrate the main efforts of his intelligence on the detection of the tank army and, having detected it, will use a large part of his weapons of mass destruction for strikes against it: this may put the army in an extremely difficult position, sharply reduce its combat effectiveness even before the beginning of combat operations, and also diminish the speed of its advance. As we know, such difficult conditions for operations by tank armies did not exist during World War II.

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In connection with the fact that it has now become easier to detect the appearance of a tank army in a front and that modern means of combat make it possible to inflict serious damage on it in a short time, the commitment of a tank army to battle will be extremely difficult. Thus, in the September 1959 exercise, the forward movement of the 17th TA (Tank Army) of the "Easterners" was detected by the intelligence of the "Westerners", and during its approach to the line of deployment, surface nuclear strikes with a total yield of about 600 kt were delivered against it. Undoubtedly, under real conditions such strikes would sharply reduce the combat effectiveness of a tank army.

In the past war, the organizational structure of the enemy's infantry divisions (his basic large units) hampered their use for maneuvers intended to contain the operations of tank armies and tank and mechanized corps. Modern infantry divisions are capable of performing these tasks more successfully. Moreover, armored divisions, the number of which has increased, may be used for these purposes.

Modern offensive operations are characterized by more frequent shifts in the efforts of the front's troops from given directions to others. Such shifts demand the rapid creation, in selected directions, of strike groupings composed of a sufficient number of tank large units. If a tank army is used as a strike grouping of a front, its maneuver, in a shift of the front's effort to a new direction, will be impeded. Such a maneuver will be difficult to hide and its conduct will require a great deal of time. In a number of cases, the tendency to use a tank army to perform the most important tasks will result in a situation in which the large units included in its composition will be held in reserve unnecessarily. This was the case during the September 1959 exercises with the 18th Tank Army (TA) which did not take part in combat operations for seven days.

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In the course of an offensive operation, tank armies are often obliged to perform tasks which are difficult to fulfil with the forces of tank divisions. In these same exercises, the 16th TA was obliged, by the course of events, to conduct combat operations connected with forcing a crossing of the Dnepr and expanding the bridgehead. The operations of the army were contained, it suffered large losses, and did not succeed in its task. The 17th TA, which was supposed to force crossings of the Dnepr and Pripjat and to operate in wooded terrain, was put in a difficult situation. In the course of the front command-staff exercise held in the Transcarpathian Military District in June 1960, the 7th TA had to resort to combat in order to cross the Carpathians.

In connection with the changes which have taken place in the organizational structure of the troops, it has become more difficult for a tank army to be separated from a combined-arms army. Today, the organization of a combined-arms large unit has changed radically. Rifle divisions have given place to motorized-rifle divisions which are superior in their technical equipment to the former motorized corps which were used as independent mobile groups or within the composition of tank armies. If one takes into account that a combined-arms army may also have tank divisions, it becomes clear that the tank army does not possess the advantage over the combined-arms army that it had in the years of World War II. The modern combined-arms army, even with a small complement (three motorized-rifle and two tank divisions), has approximately the same number of tanks and assault guns (SAU) as a tank army (three tank and one heavy tank divisions).

The difficulty of separating the tank army from the combined-arms army may lead to operations by two armies in a single zone or along a single line, which will adversely affect the performance of combat tasks. The operations of the 2nd TA and the 61st Army

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(A) in the Pomeranian Operation and also of the 12th Tank Corps (TK) of the 2nd TA and the 5th A in the Berlin operation serve as good examples of this. With a similar accumulation of troops in modern conditions, there may be great losses from enemy nuclear strikes.

It should be pointed out that in using a tank army as a front strike grouping, its safeguarding is made difficult, particularly in the coverage of its flanks and in the consolidation of captured lines. In the September 1959 exercises the fact that the 16th TA was not able to secure its flanks with its own forces was one of the reasons for its encirclement south of Kiev. To safeguard the operations of tank armies, front commanders allotted motorized-rifle divisions to them in a number of exercises.

The use of the tank army as the basic front strike grouping leads in many cases to patterns in the plan of operations and makes it easier for the enemy to find the axes in which the primary efforts of the attacking troops are concentrated.

The difficulties examined above, concerned with the use of tank armies in offensive operations, force one to ask the question: Under modern conditions, does one need tank formations (obyedineniye) at all?

It should be noted that the opinion has been expressed in our military press that in many cases it is advisable to have a tank army of a different composition. Thus, Marshal of Armored Troops P.A. Rotmistrov writes, "The operations of a tank army organized along modern lines and reinforced by two or three divisions were tested in a war game conducted between academies. In this game, its director repeatedly reinforced the tank army with several divisions in order to make it possible for it to break away faster from the main forces of the front and to develop a swift offensive into the depth of the enemy's territory".¹ In this case, a formation superior

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in offensive capabilities to the tank army of the usual composition was created. Actually, this was just a combined-arms army composed chiefly of tank divisions. 50X1-HUM

In our view, under modern conditions, it is inadvisable to have such formations as the tank army. Front strike groupings should be combined-arms armies which include the necessary number of tank divisions concentrated on the most important axes. The role of a front strike grouping may be successfully performed by a combined-arms army comprised of two or three tank and two or three motorized-rifle divisions.

A modern offensive may be conducted under the most varied conditions. During its course, in certain directions and at certain times, a task which has been assigned may be performed more successfully by a large unit possessing the qualities of a tank division and, in another direction and at another time, by a large unit with the qualities of a motorized-rifle division. In view of this, tank and motorized-rifle large units should be combined in a formation which comprises a strike grouping.

Certain comrades who persist in believing that it is necessary to retain tank armies and their special role in a future war are, at the same time, forced to admit that "The modern flexible organization of combined-arms armies which allows the motorized-rifle and tank divisions included in them to vary in their composition and which permits their transfer in case of necessity from one army to another, in order to create an army of the required make-up, favors, to a large degree, the effective use of the army in an operation. The new organization of a combined-arms army permits the modern front to be more flexible in its use of tank divisions in the decisive directions of an offensive and of armored troops in an offensive operation as a whole".¹ And, further, "The flexible

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organization of our new combined-arms army, which will include a strong armored grouping within its composition, permits a front to perform the tasks assigned to it without a tank army".²

Also worthy of attention in this respect is the statement of Marshal of Armored Troops P.A. Rotmistrov that "In some instances it will seem more expedient to reinforce the composition of a front, not with tank armies, but with individual tank large units which, together with the regrouping of the large units in the armies of a front, can be set up as a combined-arms army (or armies) of the required composition which approximates to a tank army in structure".³

The experience of postwar exercises shows that the need to make up for the inadequacies of a tank or combined-arms army sometimes makes it necessary to attach motorized-rifle divisions to a tank army or to increase the number of tank divisions in a combined-arms army. In such situations, tank and combined-arms armies will be distinguished from one another chiefly by the ratio of tank to motorized-rifle divisions. This ratio must be in accordance with the particular situation: In certain cases, the number of tank divisions in a formation must exceed the number of motorized-rifle divisions, in other cases, there must be fewer of them. One thing which is indisputable, however, is that tank divisions today must be used not in a homogeneous formation (a tank army), but in combination with motorized-rifle divisions, i.e., within combined-arms armies. In the course of a front offensive operation, depending on the situation (the nature of the enemy's operations, the conditions of the terrain, etc.), the ratio between tank and motorized-rifle divisions in armies may change sharply in one direction or the other.

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A combined-arms army, which consists mainly of tank divisions, can fulfil the role of a front strike grouping with great success. However, a combined-arms army consisting of eight or more divisions will become cumbersome and of poor mobility. In this case, a strike grouping may in practice be composed of several tank and motorized-rifle divisions (three or four). More precisely, this will be, as it were, the skeleton of the strike grouping; essentially, the divisions comprising it will perform the tasks which are now assigned to a tank army.

A combined-arms army, which has a sufficient number of tank divisions, will possess great striking power and firepower, maneuverability, and the ability to advance at a high rate. The availability of such armies would produce favorable conditions for the concealed establishment of strike groupings and for the delivery of surprise strikes against the enemy.

The reinforcement of combined-arms armies with tank divisions by the successive introduction of the latter from the reserves of the front ensures the necessary dispersal of forces and weapons; divisions will not be concentrated in limited areas, as sometimes happens when a tank army is committed to battle.

More favorable conditions are created for changes in the direction of the main strike. By introducing individual tank divisions, supplementing those of the combined-arms army already operating in the zone, a strong grouping can be created in the required direction in a shorter time and in a concealed fashion. At the same time and to the extent necessary, a reserve of tank large units may be created in a front by detaching them from armies in which there is no longer any need to center the basic efforts of the front; divisions from this reserve may subsequently be put into the zones of other armies. Such use of tank divisions prevents their being held in reserve for a long time and is conducive to the wider maneuver of large units on a frontal scale.

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In the type of organization of strike groupings which we propose, one can perform more successfully the task of replacing tank divisions with motorized-rifle divisions during the course of combat operations, one can avoid operations by two formations in one zone, ensure better coordination between a tank grouping and other large units of an army, and can also create favorable conditions for the consolidation of captured lines and for the protection of the flanks of the strike grouping.

As is known, a tank army contains a heavy tank division. We consider that such a large unit must serve as an instrument (sredstvo) of the front. Although, essentially, a heavy tank division can perform all the tasks which are carried out by a tank division, it is most advisable to use it for battle with the enemy's tanks. The nature of modern combat operations demands the widest maneuver by a heavy tank division in the zone of a front, but this maneuver is limited by its organizational link with the tank army. Both during the combat operations of a tank army and before its commitment to battle, this powerful antitank instrument is frequently held in reserve. The heavy tank division which forms the reserve of the front will be used first and foremost as an effective antitank instrument. Naturally, in case of necessity, it may be transferred to the composition of one or another of the combined-arms armies.

The foregoing leads to the following conclusions. In view of the emergence of new means of combat, of improvement in the means of intelligence, and because of the change in methods of combat operations and in the organizational structure of troops, the need for the fulfillment by tank armies of "specific" tasks in developing the success of an offensive has passed; the use of tank armies as strike groupings of a front has become more difficult. The role of the strike groupings of a front may be performed more successfully by combined-arms armies, whose composition must correspond to the particular conditions in which the operation is being carried out.

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The shift to a new troop structure which rejects tank armies, which we propose, does not entail great difficulties. The implementation of such a measure is extremely necessary and will permit generals and officers to acquire skill more quickly in a new solution to the tasks of setting up a front's strike groupings.

On the question of the advisability of creating front strike groupings by the wide maneuver of tank divisions and by their use in combination with motorized-rifle divisions -- we consider this to be the best solution to this problem, given the present-day organization of troops (with tank and motorized-rifle divisions). At the same time, we consider it necessary to work on the creation of unitary (unitarnaya) divisions which are capable of the successful performance of the highly diverse tasks which arise in the conduct of modern combat operations.

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